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THE HOLY FAMILY
From a painting at St. Petersburg

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REMBRANDT

BY
E. V. LUCAS

WITH A FRONTISPIECE IN COLOUR
AND TWELVE OTHER ILLUSTRATIONS

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REMBRANDT HARMENS VAN RIJN, the greatest painter that northern Europe has produced, was born in Leyden on July 15, 1606, when Velasquez, with whom he has points in common—not the least his unceasing vigilance for effects of light, his early maturity and his consistent individuality and independence of precursors—was seven years old. His father was a Leyden miller, whom, as well as his mother, we seem actually to have met, so lovingly did he paint them; and the boy, when his bent toward art asserted itself, was encouraged to follow it.

It is a commonplace to which many writers have given expression—one of the first being Voltaire in his *Life of Molière*—that almost all boys who have become famous in art, whether in painting, literature or music, have done so in the face of paternal disapproval. But Rembrandt

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and Velasquez were both exceptions. Rembrandt's father was cheerfully willing that the boy should be an artist, and perhaps the more so because the Dutch generally had begun to be greatly interested in painting. It offered them opportunities of setting on record in the most vivid way the greatness and prosperity in which, on the cessation of their long struggle with Spain, they were sunning themselves. Moreover, Leyden was peculiarly the home of culture, for it had its famous university, then only a few years old, and among its most honoured sons were the artists, Lucas van Leyden, whose "Last Judgment" was one of the sights of the town, and Engelbrechtsen, his master, whose altar-piece there was visited by the devout from all sides, and it was even said that the municipality had refused an offer to buy it, from the Emperor Rudolph himself.

Rembrandt, on leaving school at the age of about fifteen, was placed under a local painter named Swanenburch, upon whom was the lustre of a sojourn in Italy. With him the youth stayed for three years. He then went to Amsterdam for six months under Pieter Lastman, who, though

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not a great executant, was attracted by those problems of light and shade that his pupil was to spend his life wrestling with and mastering, and who was also much in love with Oriental costume, which was to be another of his pupil's fetishes.

But probably where this brief period under Lastman was most useful to Rembrandt was in saturating his system with the lure of Amsterdam ; for Amsterdam was his spiritual home long before it became, in 1631, his actual home, never again to be forsaken. Its crowded streets, its old houses, its ghetto and its gaberdines, its quays where sailors from every land in every foreign attire were to be found, all exerted upon this youth with the watchful, appraising eyes a spell to which he never ceased to succumb. Later he even took a house in the ghetto itself in order to have close at hand, under his very windows, the types of humanity that he found most absorbing and most pictorial.

We move, however, too fast, for before he settled definitely in Amsterdam the young Rembrandt had some years of life in Leyden, where he rejoined his father and spent his time in drawing

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and painting every one who would sit to him, and every inch of the surrounding country, while to his other activities he added etching. The evidence is that he was never idle ; he was always using those keen and thoughtful eyes, always meditating on his art. Even without definite information on the subject we should know that he was tireless, for his working life was, say, only forty-seven years, and the accepted products of his brush, his pencil and his burin run into thousands. With the possible exception of Rubens and Turner, Rembrandt was the most abundant artist in history ; but in no other way can he be compared with anyone, for he stands alone. He was always undeviatingly himself.

Such was the young artist's ambition and accomplishment that he soon found Leyden too small ; there was nothing else to paint or etch ; the great city was calling ; and in 1631, he moved to his beloved Amsterdam, with a sister to keep house for him, and almost instantly he became the leading portrait painter of the day.

In 1632, in Amsterdam, the year after settling, he put the seal on his fame and genius by the

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“ Lesson in Anatomy ”—that superb dignified thing, perhaps the finest group of men ever set on canvas—now at the Hague. Not so sparkling with life as a Frans Hals’ shooting company, where one seems to be in their actual presence, but done with a calm austerity and authority that have never been surpassed, and making a far more distinguished picture—as a picture—than anything by the Haarlem giant.

In 1634, Rembrandt married Saskia van Uylenborch, a pretty, fair-haired, wealthy Frisian girl, whom from her many portraits we know better than most of our neighbours, and in her company he was as near normal happiness as so self-conscious and ambitious an artist could be. One of the many pictures of her is in this book. Her husband lavished presents upon her, chiefly jewels and foreign silks—you see them again and again in the portraits—and for a while he became almost a social character. But not for long: sociability was too likely to interrupt his work. And then, all too soon, the life of the painter and his Saskia was clouded by the death of one child after another, until their son Titus was born and sur-

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vived: Titus, the curly-haired boy with the ardent, eager face, whom his father painted so often. And then Saskia fell into a decline, and, in 1642, died.

The eight years of Rembrandt's married life produced some of his most beautiful work, not only because Saskia so often figured in it and because marriage had evoked the tenderness in him, but because he was developing. Before then he had been sombre and somewhat hard; to his palette he now added that wonderful gold which makes his work so burningly memorable. The year of Saskia's death was the year of the great picture—now in the Ryks Museum in Amsterdam, mistakenly called “The Night Watch,” but really representing Captain Frans Banning Cocq turning out in daylight with his company from their clubhouse.

Here one suspects Rembrandt of an intentional rivalry with Frans Hals; and there is no doubt that he won, for this is a picture composed and painted by a master who brought intense consideration to every stroke—whereas the one idea of the Haarlemer was to be done with his commission as soon as possible, drink the pro-

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ceeds, and, but not till it was absolutely necessary, begin another. "The Night Watch" stands alone—there is nothing with which to compare it. Among the plates with which this essay is illustrated "The Night Watch" will be found; but of course such small reproductions are little more than *memoria technica*. You can, however, even in this reduced photograph, get an idea of how fine is the group, how dexterous the lighting, and with what a gesture the hand of the leader is thrust out of the canvas! The little girl is a charming touch.

Among Rembrandt's portraits which I have chosen are those of Elizabeth Bas at Amsterdam, and the "Girl at a Window" at Dulwich. Portraits of old ladies are rarely bad—why this is so, I cannot say; but it is a pleasant thought that painters should often be at their best when setting these venerable features on canvas, probably for the last time—and among painters of old ladies Rembrandt is as easily first on the Continent as Raeburn is in Great Britain. But of all Rembrandt's old ladies, Elizabeth Bas is the most real, the most international; we have

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all known old ladies like her. And she has a massive comfortableness, a serene sagacity, a companionable placidity that bring her closer than certain others from the same powerful hand.

The picture of the little girl leaning on a window-sill I selected for three reasons: because it is not very well known; because it is more charming than this austere, rugged painter often allowed himself to be; and because it contrasts so well with Elizabeth Bas and shows us that the great man could handle the innocence and sweetness of childhood as well as the dignity and experience of old age.

Among the pictures reproduced in this book I would draw particular attention to what has been called the most sublime landscape in the world—"The Mill". For many years this work was in the possession of Lord Lansdowne; it is now in Mr. Widener's collection in Philadelphia, where I saw it again in 1920. Constable, a fellow miller and painter, had for Rembrandt's great canvas an admiration that is almost worship; and I am not sure that if I were offered my choice of one among all Rembrandt's pictures I should not take

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this first. Landscape and portrait cannot be compared ; but it is for landscape that the ultimate devotion of most of us would, I imagine, be reserved. When the time comes to die it is upon such a landscape as this that our eyes would rest.

Next to "The Mill" I think my favourite Rembrandts are "The Vision of Daniel", for the beauty and unearthly loveliness of the angel, and that touching scriptural scene depicting Christ and the pilgrims at Emmaus.

Rembrandt's latter days were complicated by lawsuits and financial worries. He had contracted expensive habits when Saskia was alive, partly because he was getting big prices and partly because he had the use of her fortune ; he had taken a large house ; he frequented sales and bought freely. The collecting mania seized him and dominated him ; such was his determination to acquire that he had the habit of opening the bidding with an offer far beyond anyone else's capacity, and thus swiftly making sure. Among his possessions when, in 1656, he was sold up, were pictures by various contemporaries—for he had an admiration for certain rivals that all artists

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cannot rise to—armour, costumes, sumptuous stuffs, and not a few Italian masters, including a Giorgione.

But as Rembrandt grew older the tide of fashion receded from him and his rough vigour and uncompromising sincerity in favour of more polished painters and the minute school, chief of which was Gerard Dou, one of his own pupils. But although Rembrandt was made a bankrupt and was too often a litigant; although Saskia was dead and he was no longer young and was living miserably in an inn; his belief in his genius did not desert him, nor his enthusiasm for the mystery of art and his passion for the conquest of its secrets, and he painted with more energy than ever. One of his latest works is the glorious group of *Staalmeesters*, or *Syndics of the Cloth Hall*, now in the *Ryks Museum*, where we have again, as in the "*Lesson in Anatomy*", both a series of portraits and a sublime composition.

Although he lost his wife, his children, his money and his popularity, and died in solitude and neglect at the age of sixty-three, Rembrandt's life must be called happy, because he lived for

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his art and his interest in art's problems never abated. We may not find much joy in it when he was, so to speak, off duty, but this was very seldom, for he was the kind of studious experimentalist who carried his prevailing passion with him wherever he went.

To an ordinary, intelligent, appreciative man, for instance, a beautiful landscape is an end in itself; he watches the play of light and shade with pleasure and passes on. But Rembrandt could see nothing without either painting it, wanting to paint it, or wondering how he would deal with it if he did paint it. Similarly, it is enough for the ordinary, intelligent, appreciative person to talk with a wise old lady, hear her ripe comments and admire the fleeting expressions as they cross her face, wrinkled by age and moulded by experience. Not so Rembrandt. He would be engrossed by the problem of her portrait—how to place her so that her most salient characteristics would be brought out, what kind of shadows would best fill the hollows and emphasize the high surfaces.

To Rembrandt the world was first a subject

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for paint, and only secondarily a place to live in and be human and merry and frivolous in. Women were useful to provide painters with food—of which, however, he thought little—and other necessities, but chiefly to act as sitters at odd times. We have no reason to think that he did not love Saskia according to his ability, but we know that one of her principal duties was to serve as his model.

Rembrandt was not like the run of artists of our own acquaintance, genial, free-and-easy fellows who return from their sketching rounds or lock the studio door when the sun sets, and give themselves to conviviality and talk and sleep until long after he has risen again ; to Rembrandt the glory of daylight and all the fascinating difficulties it presents to the painter were not more alluring than the glory of candlelight and firelight and the difficulties that they also present—so that there was no rest either for him or for Saskia. Having posed by day, she had to pose by night.

But it must not be thought that Rembrandt was peculiarly exacting as regards Saskia alone.

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She, after all, was his wife, and therefore more or less his property ; but his father, mother, sisters and brothers had also in their turn to sit to him, whenever he insisted ; nor did he spare himself, for he painted at a mirror his own portrait between fifty and sixty times ! And then we have to remember, too, that whereas most artists are one thing or the other—painters in oil, painters in water-colours, black-and-white men or etchers—Rembrandt was all. If every one of his paintings were to disappear, he would still remain, merely on the strength of his etchings, one of the greatest forces that the world has known.

Mauritsbuis, The Hague

THE ANATOMY LESSON





SASKIA WITH A RED FLOWER

Museum, Dresden



Ryks Museum, Amsterdam

THE NIGHT WATCH



PORTRAIT OF ELIZABETH BAS

Ryks Museum, Amsterdam



GIRL AT A WINDOW

Museum, Dulwich



Widener Collection, Philadelphia

THE MILL



THE VISION OF DANIEL.

Kaiser Friedrich Museum, Berlin



CHRIST AT EMMAUS

Louvre, Paris

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PORTRAIT OF HADRIAN

Kaiser Friedrich Museum, Berlin

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THE ANGEL QUITTING THE FAMILY OF TOBIT

Louvre, Paris



THE PHILOSOPHER

National Gallery, London



THE PRESENTATION IN THE TEMPLE

Museum, The Hague

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